

Communities of Practice Peer Learning Groups

By Rev. Joanne Thomson, Associate Conference Minister for Church Development and Renewal

When we began to develop a clergy Communities of Practice program in the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ, I announced that if we were able to get two new groups up and running I would declare victory. We ended up with twelve groups, located all over the state, facilitated by wise and wonderful people. What have I learned from our experience?

The need is real and pastors want this. People did not need to be convinced. Pastors know that support, reflection, and companionship are vitally important to their ministries.

Launching this program statewide took a serious investment of organizational time upfront...but the rewards are worth it. Our Conference decided that supporting pastors in this way was a priority, and allowed us the time and funding to get the groups off the ground.

We talk all the time about how we have to do things differently. Well, now we are actually doing something differently. Sometimes the conversation about church and culture and change seems to go on forever endlessly, without our ever taking the leap and doing something in a way we haven't done it before. Through the Communities of Practice, I see clergy providing support for one another in a different kind of way, something beyond parking lot conversations and going out for coffee together. I think that the difference is that we, and especially the facilitators, are taking on a new kind of responsibility for one another. And similarly, I see our middle judicatory acting in a new way. We've made it possible for a diverse group of leaders to offer the kind of support that was formerly provided primarily by staff. Some people see this as a sign of the decline of the judicatory, believing that the groups have been put in place to backstop the services no longer available because of budget cuts. However, I believe that our facilitators and group members now have the space to grow into a deeper understanding of their ordination and of their role as leaders in our denomination. The middle judicatory isn't an office building located outside Madison – it's us, all of us, the body together, meeting and praying together in groups across the state, living into our responsibility toward one another as leaders of the church.

Ask. It took us a while to figure out how to fit together all the jigsaw puzzle pieces of leadership, scheduling, budgeting, promoting, etc. It has been very important to design a program that works for our Conference, honoring our strengths, weaknesses, culture, and geography, and not simply to adopt a system that worked well somewhere else. From the beginning, the folks in the Massachusetts Conference were outrageously helpful to us. It was tempting just to try to do what they had done. But in Massachusetts there is at least one Congregational church on every corner. In Wisconsin, on the other hand, there is at least one pub on every corner. We had to plan for a state with a very different density of UCC congregations and where many congregations are served by licensed lay pastors with day jobs. Our planning team benefitted more than we can say from the invitation to talk through our challenges with people who were ahead of us on the road. In fact, wherever we turned, we discovered a spirit of collaboration and generosity from people who had been involved with Communities of Practice and the Pastoral Excellence Network. One of the best things about being involved with this program, to tell the truth, is experiencing this spirit of openness to being something new together.